

TRUTH *VERSUS* ERROR.

BY D. G. ELLIOT F. R. S. E.

IN HIS defence of Canon XL of the A. O. U. Code, my friend Dr. Allen has accused me, half heartedly it must be confessed, and as if he was not quite sure of his premises, of misrepresenting the beauties and advantages of that wonderful production, and also the beneficial results, which in his opinion, the enlightened doctrine it preaches has achieved. If I was capable of committing the crime so delicately mentioned (and I hardly deem it necessary to defend myself from the charge), in this instance, it would be as profitless and unnecessary as an attempt to blacken coal, for it would be quite impossible with all the skill possessed by the most adroit manipulator to make the Gospel of Error this Canon advocates appear in a more unlovely aspect than it has itself so successfully accomplished. The charge made of misrepresentation, however, is the familiar plea of all those who try to defend an indefensible cause, and is synonymous with the legal maxim "when you have no case, abuse the opposing Counsel." Stability and uniformity of nomenclature is the goal which all naturalists are striving to attain, and after fifteen years, during which this Canon has been permitted to instill its pernicious counsel in the minds of ornithologists entirely unopposed, yet all the success that Dr. Allen can claim it has achieved is, that "it has practically thus far rendered fixed and permanent the nomenclature of North American ornithology, *in North America at least,*" and thereupon he qualifies this by adding "in so far as the emendation or rejection of names upon purely philological grounds is concerned." The after-thought, italicised by me above, was most happily grasped by its author, and thus he saved himself from a disastrous overthrow. It is also stated that "so nearly all the leading authorities in vertebrate zoölogy in this country" are among its supporters and advocates. "So nearly all" while a very safe way of enumerating, is not any more definite as regards numbers than is the expression "few" applied to those "leading authorities" whom Dr. Allen kindly permits to join Dr. Coues and myself in rejecting this Canon.

In not including among his sympathizers the experts in invertebrate zoölogy, I suppose Dr. Allen attributes their defection entirely to a lack of backbone, which would not permit them a sufficient rigidity to be wrong when they could be right! My friendly critic did not care, in his assertion of the success Canon XL has achieved, to go beyond the boundaries of the United States, save to make a faint claim of having converted some "Naturalists abroad being well aware that the doctrine that advocates adopting not only every blunder that is in sight, but also every one that shall be made hereafter, is not one likely to find favor with those who have been taught from their childhood to write grammatically and spell correctly. Excepting in the case of "so nearly all the leading authorities, at least in North America," how has this educational Canon succeeded in other lands? The authors of the Great Catalogue of Birds, which for many years to come will be the standard work in Ornithology, have throughout the long series of volumes already issued, with an unanimity that was to be expected, completely ignored and repudiated this Canon XL, and have not permitted the blunders of other writers to disfigure their productions. These gentlemen are the recognized "leading authorities" in ornithological science in the Old World, both on account of their scientific as well as their literary attainments, and as "educated men" versed in classical knowledge and grammatical construction, it can never be expected that even a conformity of nomenclature can be established if it depends upon their endorsement of the doctrine embodied in Canon XL. Where then is stability of nomenclature to be looked for? Is it to be confined "at least to North America?" Is the avifauna of this country so great and paramount that we can build a Chinese wall along our borders and have a nomenclature all our very own and be quite independent of those who are not so happy as to live among us? The Birds of North America, numerous and splendid as they are, constitute only a fraction of those of the world, and a stable nomenclature for our feathered inhabitants can only be assured by coöperating with ornithologists of other lands. And it requires no prophet to foretell that some other basis will be necessary than the tenets offered by Canon XL before any agreement will be reached.

“In North America at least” everything is not lovely, and serene. There are a “few!” even Dr. Allen admits that much, who with Dr. Coues and myself refuse to bow the knee to Baal. We may be of little repute, but so long as we insist upon writing grammatically and spelling correctly there can be no uniformity in the nomenclature of North American ornithology, in spite of the fact that “so nearly all” of the “leading authorities,” will hereafter do their best to perpetuate blunders. If, as is claimed, the “leading authorities” among American ornithologists have nearly all become advocates of the doctrine of error preached in Canon XL we must not forget that some of them were members of the Committee that formulated its provisions, and it was to be expected that they would do their utmost, like my friendly critic, to induce others to adopt these and enjoy the manifold blessings they shower on thankful hearts. Only one of the Committee has publicly expressed his disapproval of this rule. Possibly there are others of his opinion but who have not yet spoken. If among those who as yet have not attained the dignity of being a “leading authority,” there are some who have accepted this Canon as their mentor and guide, it is probable that they have been influenced in a large degree so to do from a mistaken loyalty to the Union. This same mistaken loyalty to the works of the Committee caused the adoption of our Check-List, when it was known to contain many, even grievous errors, certain of which have lately been corrected, but the end is not yet. A similar exhibition of courage in removing blunders and which should eliminate Canon XL, would be advantageous to the Union and Ornithological Science. Dr. Allen seems considerably elated because other Naturalists as he claims besides ornithologists have in some degree adopted this Gospel of Error. While we may all be gratified to witness the A. O. U. Code accepted by other zoölogists in all its provisions, excepting Canon XL, and believe it the best guide they can have, we must not lose sight of the fact that the Code was written primarily for ornithologists, and one of its chief aims was the attainment of a stable nomenclature for birds. Therefore, if one of its Canons proves to have been unfortunately drawn, and contains precepts that will effectually defeat the very object desired, it is poor comfort to learn

that we have only succeeded in leading our brethren astray. Moreover it was Ornithological nomenclature we desired to render stable before all else, and what zoölogists, devoted to other branches, may do, neither helps nor harms us. If we are right, it matters not to ornithology if those in other branches go wrong, nor does it help us when we go wrong if they all follow our example, save on the principle that "misery loves company." The Code is not so sacred an instrument as I fear Dr. Allen regards it, that it may not be emended, even by the unhallowed efforts of Purists and Classicists. The pity of it is that any of its Canons so urgently require correction. Dr. Allen appears greatly disturbed at some of my remarks upon faulty construction and bad spelling, and assures us that there have been many authors who have endorsed Canon XL who know how to spell in as many languages as I and my "few" sympathizers do. While delighted to be informed that this knowledge is so widespread that even some "eminent authors" have acquired it, I would however beg to state that I am not aware that in anything I have said I have made claim to a special knowledge of any language, or of being unusually proficient in orthography or etymology, nor has anything that I have written been directed against any particular individual, be he a "leading authority" or of more humble station. My article in the October number of this journal had but one object in view, to call the attention of the members of the Union to the Gospel of Error taught in Canon XL, which in my opinion (and according to Dr. Allen, a 'few others,' but I only speak for myself), is thoroughly bad, and in some respects calculated to lead many astray by its teachings. Thoroughly bad, because it strives to elevate Error over Truth and Wrong over Right, and gives to the law of priority an interpretation that was never intended, for while this law protects an author in his discoveries, there is no clause that provides a safeguard for his blunders. And the teachings of this Canon are evil because they misdirect those, who, whatever may be the reason that actuates them, prefer to follow some leader depending on his knowledge or experience, and there are many such, little heeding where their guide may take them, rather than investigate for themselves.

Dr. Allen thinks it "too absurd for serious consideration," the charge that this Canon XL places a premium upon illiteracy, and yet what are the facts? It provides for the retention of names no matter how ridiculous they may be, nor how grossly they may violate all rules of orthography and etymology, and then assures all those who may commit such blunders that they shall be perpetuated. That is clearly offering a premium on illiteracy, for a writer would doubtless feel that even though he tried earnestly to have his production free from blunders, yet it would not matter, if he was not up in his Greek and Latin, for his errors if he made any, would stand in the place of honor side by side with those words that were correct in construction. It is true that the rule ends with some good advice such as, "word coiners will pay the closest attention to philological proprieties," but if any are ignorant of these proprieties, attention to them, no matter how densely concentrated, would be of little avail. And Dr. Allen in his glorification of this rule says that the rising generation of naturalist have not "perceptibly deteriorated" in their spelling. The "rising generation" will no doubt return thanks for so much praise. If, however, they have not "perceptibly deteriorated" it is not the fault of Canon XL which tells them they can be careless with impunity, but because the facilities for instruction afforded by this Age enables every one to acquire an education, therefore, the blunders in nomenclature become more and more obnoxious, and the precepts of this Canon more and more distasteful.

One of the principal objections to amending Canon XL urged by Dr. Allen in his 'Defense,' as I gather from reading it, is the great number of blunders that exists in ornithological nomenclature, and he fears that I do not appreciate what a task it would be to overcome them. It is a poor soldier who throws down his weapons because the enemy appears formidable, and in spite of multitudes it is quite unnecessary to follow the example of the Advocates of Error and take refuge in the opposing ranks. Run over to the enemy in fact! The difficulties of the task are more fictitious than real, and would speedily vanish together with the blunders themselves before a competent tribunal summoned to substitute a sensible Canon XL, for the one that now

burdens the Code. There is no doubt in my mind that a Canon could be drawn that would be acceptable to all Naturalists and offend none in any of its provisions, and produce a nomenclature that would be stable.

Those who have no sympathy with Canon XL and its doctrines are characterized in the 'Defense' as extremists. I leave it to my colleagues, the overwhelming majority of whom I am persuaded prefer Truth to Error, to decide which is the better, to be extremely right or extremely wrong, and of those who comprise the two classes thus designated which are the reprehensible extremists? In Dr. Allen's wrestling with the spelling lesson that worries him so greatly, on page 300 he complains because transliteration from other languages in Latin is so difficult, but on page 303 he speaks of it as a "simple matter." Evidently as he investigates his eyes become open, and eventually he will be able to see clearly in their true light the evils he now so strenuously defends and that they can, by a little mental activity, be made to disappear like an uneasy dream. One more point, my friend states that purists or classicists and all other bad people who sympathize with them, though happily they are "few," vacillate and do not even spell alike, and there can never be a uniformity of nomenclature with such persons, and he enumerates quite a list of reasons why this must be so. — Man is fallible, and even those who strive with all their strength to do right, at times may wander by the way, but if they hold to the direct path an occasional slip, though it may retard their progress and that of others, yet will not prevent them from reaching the light at last. But the Advocates of Error never slip nor vacillate, nor with them is there a shadow of turning. Having determined to go wrong, "c'est le premier pas qui coûte," and that once taken "facile decensus Averni," and they speedily reach their goal and settle themselves comfortably amid the congenial darkness that can be felt. In the 'Defense' of Canon XL it is quite refreshing to observe the complacency with which it is taken for granted that its clauses can only be interpreted in one way, *viz.*: that in which the authors wish to have them regarded. Thus, take "obvious" or "known" typographical errors. By "obvious" is meant "transposition of letters" or their "inversion overlooked in proof-

reading"; by "known," where the "error has been corrected by the author." There are instances of utterly nonsensical words now in use, where the change of one letter would cause them to have an important meaning. How are we to "know" whether such words are misprints, "obvious transposition of letters," or misspelling "overlooked by the author?" There is no possible way of ascertaining, yet Canon XL insists in maintaining them in all their deformity. Among the instances available of this fact that may be cited is *Harelda*, which means nothing, is a nonsense word, but which is evidently a misprint or a misspelling for *Havelde* (Latinized Havelda), Scandinavian for Sea Duck. It is impossible to prove whether Stephens intended to write *Harelda* or overlooked the error in the proof, and so there is nothing "obvious" or "known" in the case, save the fact that Havelda is right and Harelda is wrong, but if the backward tenets of Canon XL are to be adopted we must as usual accept the wrong and reject the right. Place Error always before Truth! Of course there are other nonsense words employed, even by those who have no sympathy for Canon XL, such as "Dafila," also by the author of "Harelda." But such words have no derivation, they just "grewed" like Topsy in the temporarily disordered brains of those who originated them, consequently cannot be corrected and are protected by the law of priority. They remain, however, as monuments to the frivolousness and extremely bad taste of their authors. And here, we may suppose, the Advocates of Error would come forward and with ill-concealed exultation, exclaim: "Well, if these nonsense words answer the purpose, why not accept those, that, derived from well known Greek or Latin sources, have, through the ignorance or carelessness of their authors, also become nonsense words?" Simply for two reasons. — First, because a word properly spelled has a definite meaning and often gives the clue to the habits of the animal it represents, its general appearance, or its relationship to others; and second, because, to employ it in its debased condition, is repugnant to an educated man and is a source of offense whenever met with, and what is of even more importance, because it prevents the very information its author desired to convey from being known. There is no question that any epithet applied to a species would



serve to distinguish it after it becomes known, and the more nonsensical and outrageous the spelling might be the more it would probably be remembered, and the most bizarre words have been coined to prove that this is a fact. But this method is neither sensible nor scientific, and the evils of such a procedure are fully appreciated even by the Authors of Canon XL, who urgently advise naturalists with the same breath they promise to perpetuate their blunders, to observe when forming words all the philological proprieties. Surely this advice was entirely unnecessary, if names have no importance but are merely handles to swing species on.

If that which is the most easy is to be adopted in place of that which is most correct, if knowledge is to be considered of little worth, and blunders, no matter what may have been the cause that produced them, are to be preferred because first born, to that which is well shapen and correct; if, through mere force of numbers, erroneous and faulty productions are to be placed on an equality with those words grammatically correct, achieved only through their Author's intimate, possibly profound, knowledge of classical literature, and if there shall be no uniform nomenclature unless it be that one debased by all the errors that ever have been or ever shall be committed, then it is easy to perceive that we shall have no Augustan Age of ornithological literature, but that its swift decadence will surely follow. In this 'Defense' of a Cult that can have no possible attractions for any educated person and which is a debasement of all literary effort, the Advocates of Error have spoken, and with the voice of their strongest man, and when the arguments advanced are subjected to a critical analysis, what do we receive? Only this — "It is exceedingly difficult to do right, and superlatively easy to do wrong, therefore, my brothers, do wrong." How simple! And now in conclusion. It is quite evident from Dr. Allen's attitude that if he can prevail upon the majority of the Committee to adopt his views, there can be little hope of improving by that Body the present illiterate condition existing in the nomenclature of North American ornithology; the remedy must come from without. Therefore, and I do not now address myself to the "authorities," but to those who, if they have not attained that glorious distinction, yet who will be the future leaders in North American ornithology, I would repeat



what I said in my former paper, and urge my younger colleagues not to be beguiled by the voice of the charmer, but to repudiate this Canon XL and all its mischievous doctrines. Have nothing to do with precepts that would advise you to choose Error before Truth, and elevate Wrong over Right, but stand firmly for grammatical purity and orthographical correctness, a position which, if stoutly held, will not cause you in after years to look back upon your writings with regret, that you knowingly permitted them to be disfigured by the blunders of others. Use your influence to overthrow the Doctrine of Error, that with siren voice has been sung in your ears so long, and the 'few' adherents that are now unwillingly accorded to the ranks of the opponents of this gospel will become a mighty force to battle for the Truth. Sometimes, however, it requires but a little leaven to permeate a large lump and cause it to change its aspect, and the conflict may not be so severe as the Advocates of Error would like to have us believe. As for my friend, who has honored my paper with his criticism, and whose eminent services to Natural Science have been so widely and deservedly acknowledged, and whose long and successful labors in declaring nature's truths makes his position on this subject the more incongruous, of him, in this instance, I am obliged mournfully to say, as did the old prophet of his illustrious but wilful nation, "Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone."

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BY J. A. ALLEN.

IT IS seldom that a title for an essay is more unhappily chosen than in the case of Mr. Elliot's "*Truth versus Error*." In this long effusion on the subject of Canon XL of the A. O. U. code he betrays "the weakness of his cause," to borrow the phraseology of my esteemed disputant, by beautifully illustrating the maxim he has himself quoted, namely, "When you have a bad cause, abuse the opposing counsel." With this feature removed